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Green Ganesha Chaturthi: The Ritualising and Materialising of a Green Hindu Identity and the Emerging of an Alternative Representation of Ganesha

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Abstract: With the world facing an ecological crisis, Hindus are challenged to reflect on the ways they impact their environment. The last few decades witnessed a rise of theological reflections on Hindu traditions—especially scriptures and concepts (not least by western scholars)—that advocate environmentally friendly perspectives. This stands in sharp contrast with the multiple examples of how Hindu ritual practices cause harm to the environment. Ganesha Chaturthi is a festival that due to the public element of immersion of Ganesha idols, has led to severe pollution of waterbodies. Because of the attention that has been paid to this lately, the festival now calls for ecofriendly alternatives. This article analyses how recently, environmental awareness is ritualized and materialized in the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. For this, fieldwork was conducted during Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai in 2022. The focus of the article lies on the ecofriendly material and ritual innovations of the festival—for instance the variety of Ganeshas made of biodegradable materials—and the dynamics of interaction with (alleged) traditions to validate a Green Hindu identity in general and the development of a Green Ganesha in particular.

Keywords: Ganesha Chaturthi; Chennai; Mumbai; Green Ganesha; ritual innovation; environmental sustainability

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1. Introduction

One of the conventional assumptions within the discourse of Hinduism and contemporary environmental sustainability is that the holistic worldview (or the idea of non-dualism) of Hindus positively affects the ways Hindus at present treat the environment. In the course of my fieldwork, several Hindus conceptualized this connection between humans and their world with the phrase 'the world is one family' or with the Sanskrit concept *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (informal conversation A.M. 24 August 2022, Bangalore; Awasthi 2021, p. 5). Karen Armstrong suggests that the well-known Indian concept *ahimsa* (non-violence) gives a positive impetus to the relationship between humans and nature because it enhances a way of thinking in which people have deep empathy with all creatures (Armstrong 2022, pp. 31–33, 181–93). Christopher Framarin challenges the relevance of such perspectives for environmental ethics, arguing that interconnectedness in Hinduism not automatically results in moral standing of all nature (Framarin 2014, pp. 1–2).

Like with any other religious tradition, evidence can both be provided of practices and views within Hinduism that support environmental sustainability, and counterarguments of damaging views and practices (Habermann 2017, p. 36). One of the problems with the study of Hinduism and environmentalism is that 'environmentalism' (similar to the concept Hinduism) was never part of the traditional vocabulary. Pankaj Jain, however, sets out with reference to three communities in India that environmentalism is ingrained in the daily lives of these people without conceptualizing it—the only suitable concepts is according to him *dharma*—and that these communities offer a unique avenue for approaching environmental restoration today (Jain 2011, pp. 3–4). In my fieldwork, people most often

used the English concepts 'ecofriendly' and 'environmentalism' although some people introduced 'traditional concepts': *prakriti samraksha* (protecting nature) and less frequently also *prakriti premseva* (serving nature with love) and *dharti mata raksha* (protecting mother earth). The interaction of contemporary Hindu environmentalism with traditional practices and concepts is a topic of its own. In this article this dynamic is only paid attention to insofar it relates to the reconsideration of some dominant representations of Ganesha.

The assumption that the well-known practice in Hinduism of reverence of natural phenomena—referred to as bio-divinity by Emma Tomalin (Tomalin 2009)—results in environmental friendly behavior, can easily be objected: ritual practices devoted to for instance the sacred river Yamuna cause severe pollution to the river (Habermann 2017, p. 38). Inspired by a global awareness of climate change, Hindu rituals at riverbanks and seashores have been scrutinized in popular media by environmentalists and by researchers. The ritual practice of *visarjan* or immersion (of idols) is one of the most polluting ritual activities (see Figure 1). *Visarjan* is, amongst other Hindu minor festivals and rituals, specifically known as part of the annual festivals of Ganesha Chaturthi and Navratri. For the latter, the festival statues of Durga are immersed at the end of the (ten-day) festival at public waterbodies. Studies have been conducted on the effect of the water quality and the increase of heavy metals due to the immersion of Durgas (Zaman et al. 2018; Makwana 2020). A brief exploration and my fieldwork (in Mumbai, where Navratri is also extensively celebrated) suggests that the efforts to make ecofriendly Durgas is limited compared to the increase of Green Ganeshas (interview Prasanth 8 September 2022, Mumbai). The adaptability of Ganesha is discussed in more detail in Sections 3 and 6.

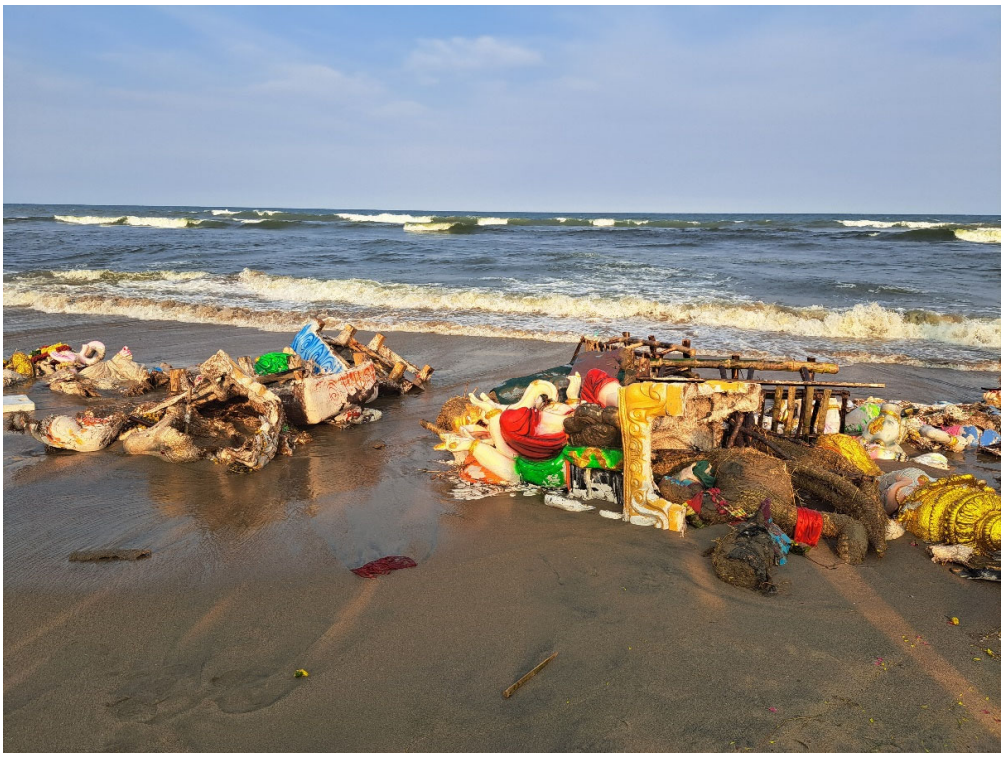

Figure 1. Washed-up Ganeshas at Pattinapakkam beach in Chennai on the day that the *visarjan* (immersion) of Ganesha took place in 2022. Picture taken by author, 4 September 2022, Chennai.

In this article I focus on how dynamics of a (contemporary) Green Hindu identity are ritualized and materialized in the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. It is because of the high pollution brought about by the element of *visarjan*, that the festival is now subject to environmental sustainable initiatives. Similar to the studies on the environmental effects of the immersion of Durga, multiple articles have been published about the pollution that

the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi causes to waterbodies. These articles mention the effect of several non-biodegradable materials used to make the festival Ganeshas, for instance: Plaster of Paris, Thermocol, plastics and chemical dyes that contain mercury and cadmium (Hiray and Haram 2010; Makwana 2020). Because of the increased awareness of the polluting effects of immersion of Ganeshas during Ganesha Chaturthi, the Indian Central Pollution Control Board formulated in 2010 some general guidelines for idol immersion. Their guideline to use clay for the Ganeshas were prescriptive in nature and not strictly followed. On the contrary, all over the country the restrictions were opposed. The heights of Ganeshas made of non-biodegradable materials installed at public sites extensively increased over the past 20 years, with the famous Khairatabad Ganesha of 61 feet in 2019 as a notorious example (Khairatabad Ganesh idol to be 40-foot tall this year 2021) However, in 2020 an order passed by the Central Pollution Control Board, forbade the use of idols for immersion to be made of Plaster of Paris and Thermocol. Due to the loss of income caused by COVID, the restrictions were lifted for one year (Environment Ministry allows Use of Plaster of Paris for Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja Idols for a Year 2022) and this was still the case in Mumbai and Chennai in 2022 (see Section 4). However, with these impending restrictions and a general growing awareness of environmental sustainability in mind, 2022 witnessed a further increase of ecofriendly Ganeshas: even the famous Khairatabad Ganesha was in 2022 a 50-feet tall clay statue. Instead of immersion of the Ganesha, water was sprinkled on the idol to melt the clay and the clay is given to devotees to use for gardening purposes (Mungara 2022).

This article introduces several aspects of contemporary Green Hinduism in India by looking at the public Hindu festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. I take in this article a ritual and material perspective to investigate how dynamics of contemporary Green Hinduism intersect with the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. The focus on a pan-Indian public ritual as an exemplary practice to enhance environmental awareness seems an un(der)explored research perspective. For an investigation of Green *Hinduism*—with compared to other (mainly Western) religions a strong focus on (ritual) practices—and environmentalism—that focusses on how to improve and protect the natural environment—a focus on a public ritual that affects the environment seems methodological wise a natural choice. In the context of the global climate crisis and an increased awareness of the polluting effects of the festival, Ganesha Chaturthi discloses several aspects of contemporary Green Hinduism that I discuss in more detail in this article: a reinvention of (alleged) traditional practices (to argue that Hinduism is inherently environmental friendly), the adaptability of Hinduism to changing circumstances and particularly the reshaping of deities (in this case the 'greening' of Ganesha), and a unique entanglement of ecological awareness and right wing Hindu nationalism that sensitizes us that environmentalism (in India) is not exclusively leftish.

To understand the relevance of Ganesha Chaturthi in all its richness, I first provide a brief historical sketch of the development of Ganesha Chaturthi over the past 150 years, with a specific focus on its politicization (Section 2 The Politicization of Ganesha Chaturthi over the past 150 Years). This is followed by Section 3 (The Organic Nature of Ganesha) in which I introduce Ganesha and some of the stories and practices about him that are central to Ganesha Chaturthi and/or seem to be of relevance to Green Ganesha. Section 4 introduces the public celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai in 2022 (the two cities where I have conducted fieldwork in 2022) and analyses the materialising of ecofriendly Ganeshas during Ganesha Chaturthi in those cities.[1] Section 5 discusses the intersection of Green Hinduism and the festival Ganeshas that are used in domestic rituals at the festival time. The final section is a discussion of dynamics of the interaction of contemporary Green Hinduism with tradition. In line with several other scholars I provide—based on my fieldwork—some shared characteristics of contemporary Hindu environmentalism and Hindu right wing nationalism and evaluate how the organic character of Ganesha provides the possibility to turn him into a modern Green Hindu deity.

2. The Politicization of Ganesha Chaturthi over the Past 150 Years

Ganesha Chaturthi (also referred to as Vinayaka Chaturthi in Tamil Nadu; Fuller 2004, p. 266) is a 10-day festival. The festival's name indicates its time of celebration: it starts on the fourth day (*chaturthi*) of the bright half of the sixth lunar-solar month of the Hindu calendar, referred to as Bhadrapad (Kaur 2003, p. 97). Although the birthday of Ganesha (Ganesha Jayanti) is celebrated in the lunar month of Magh (around February), in the course of my fieldwork Ganesha Chaturthi became also related to Ganesha's birthday (Jadhav 2019; Fieldhouse 2017, p. 232; informal conversation friend of Shakti Amma, 27 August 2022, Vellore). This tendency happens to become dominant in some popular articles as well and is probably related to popular (children's) tales of Ganesha and the moon (Singh and Ratate 2021, p. 2; see on Ganesha and the moon: Section 3).

At present, large festival Ganeshas are produced well before the start of Ganesha Chaturthi and some days prior to the festival placed in *pandals* (temporary structures, stages, see for examples of large Ganeshas Figure 2). The festival Ganeshas are ritually consecrated (*pran pratishtha)* by a priest (Fieldhouse 2017, p. 233). At the end of the festival, the Ganeshas are taken in procession to a waterbody where they are immersed (*visarjan*) into the water. This immersion into the water also happens with small (clay) Ganeshas that are placed during the festival time in home shrines. Joyce Flueckiger explains how in Hyderabad a matriarch of the family created a Ganesha out of clay and dropped it in a water well in the garden on the third day. Other people bring their Ganeshas to the Ganesha *pandal* in the neighborhoods from where the Ganeshas are taken together with the large public Ganesha in procession to the waterbody at the end of the festival (Flueckiger 2015, pp. 130–31).

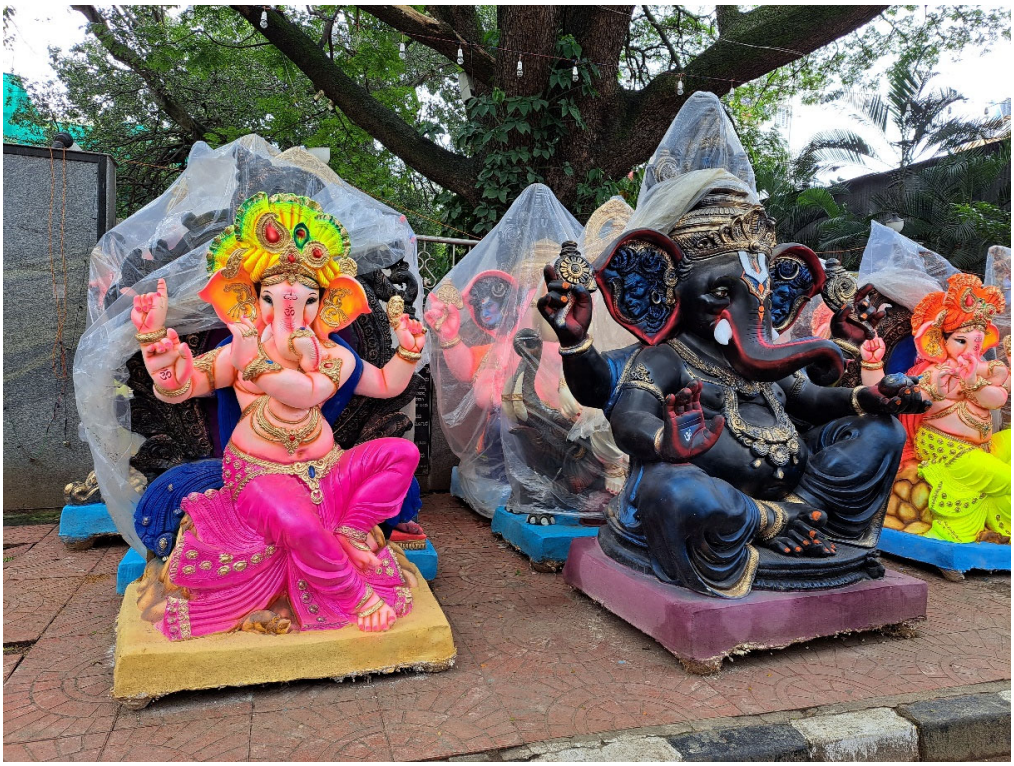

Figure 2. Large Ganeshas for sale in the week prior to Ganesha Chaturthi. Picture taken by author, 25 August 2022, Bangalore.

The cult of Ganesha can be traced back to the 6th or 7th century in the state of Maharashtra. Some Maharashtrian groups started to venerate Ganesha as their family deity. One such group, the Peshwas, served as prime ministers of the Maharatha kings (Mariwala 2021, p. 38). The Maharatha ruler Shivaji (c. 1630–1680) was highly influenced

by the Peshwas and he used Ganesha Chaturthi to encourage nationalist sentiments among the Hindus (Fieldhouse 2017, p. 233).

Ganesha Chaturthi was further politicized by the nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920). At the end of the nineteenth century he found a legal loophole to bypass the British law that forbade the gathering of large groups for political purposes. Religious processions were still allowed and he thus started to organize large Ganesha processions during Ganesha Chaturthi in Mumbai to reinforce an Indian nationalist identity (Flueckiger 2015, p. 137). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Indian autonomy was the priority and Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Muhammed Ali Jinnah (who became a key proponent of a separate Pakistan state) jointly celebrated Ganesha Chaturthi in Mumbai. By the end of the nineteenth century the two-nations theory began to rise, and the articulation of a Hindu identity in the procession started to resemble the earlier development among Shivaji in the seventeenth century. Anoushka Mariwala argues in her thesis on Ganesha Chaturthi in Mumbai that: "Tilak, Savarkar, and other independence leaders used the festival to de-territorialize the nation state against its colonial condition, but also simultaneously preempt and initiate the project of re-territorialization against Muslim Indians, a goal that once more brought the religious and the political in close, tense, contact". (Mariwala 2021, p. 18). In the last few decades (especially after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya) violence between Muslims and Hindus during the Ganesha Chaturthi processions have increased and at several occasions people were killed during the festival period. In a section on Ganesha Chaturthi, Joyce Flueckiger argues that in India "Hindu and Muslim religious processions (such as Muharram processions) have historically been, and continue to be, one way for different communities to claim public space and perform communal identities; and these processions have periodically created tensions (even violence) between communities". (Flueckiger 2015, p. 137).

Most of the above mentioned examples of the development of Ganesha Chaturthi are from the state of Maharashtra. Mumbai is still mentioned as the most famous city for Ganesha Chaturthi (hence my selection of this city as case study). However, from this city the festival started to spread across India and at present Ganesha Chaturthi is considered a pan-Indian festival.

Chennai is nowadays the center of Ganesha Chaturthi in Tamil Nadu. According to academic literature, the public celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi started there only in the 1980s. In 1983, as mentioned in C. J. Fuller's description of the festival, Hindu activists from the broad spectrum of Hindu right wing parties installed a Ganesha in West Mambalam (a suburb of Chennai). From that year on, the public character of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai has expanded and it still does (Fuller 2001, p. 1607). One of the main representatives of the Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front) in Chennai (Mr. Elango) told me a story of the development of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai. This story, predating the event in 1983, adapted the origin of the festival into early twentieth century Dravidian nationalism. Mr. Elango told that at the same time when Tilak popularized Ganesha Chaturthi in Mumbai, the Tamil poet Bharathiyar (1882–1921) kept a Ganesha at Marina Beach and he performed Ganesha rituals at public places in the city. After he passed away, there was a decline in public Ganesha rituals in Chennai but this was revived in 1983 by Ramagopalan, the founder of the Hindu Munnani (interview Mr. Elango, 31 August 2022, Kolathur). In the 1980s and 1990s the principal initiators of Ganesha Chaturthi in almost every locality in Tamil Nadu were activists belonging to the Hindu Munnani, RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and other organizations that belong to the Sangh Parivar (umbrella term of the collection of Hindu nationalist organizations). The celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai was from the very start aligned with right wing Hindu nationalism and a vehicle to spread Hindutva ideology (Fuller 2001, pp. 1607–8). However, there are and were always people who organized Ganesha Chaturthi initiatives without political motives. Fuller mentions that apart from the suburb Triplicane, especially in Chennai the festival has also became a religious-cum-

cultural celebration in which many independent celebrations not organized by Hindu nationalists have sprung up (Fuller 2004, p. 276).

The intersection of the Hindu right wing ideology and religious processions in India has been studied by many scholars in detail and is very prominent in the presentation of Ganesha Chaturthi in academic literature. A welcome exception to this perspective is Kaur's focus on aesthetic expressions of artists during Ganesha Chaturthi. Kaur presents some Ganesha *mandaps* in Pune where—along with the festival Ganeshas—several (Thermocol) replicas of India's famous monuments were placed. One participant of her study mentioned that he would like to see in the tableaux of the Ganesha *mandaps* the aspects of spectacular ideas, religious and social awareness, and scenes that involve innovative thoughts (Kaur 2003, p. 102). The materialisation of diverse ecofriendly Ganeshas discussed in this article includes a focus on one or a combination of these aspects, that are often overlooked due to a strong focus on political Hinduism.[2] It places these aspects in the context of the performance of a Green Hindu identity in the public space at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi.

3. The Organic Nature of Ganesha

In this section I introduce the organic nature of Ganesha. By organic I mean (1) Ganesha's origin from organic matter and (2) his quality to develop and easily adapt over time. Alongside, I also introduce the story of 'Ganesha and Chandra' which occurred to me a contrived effort to give a mythical backbone to the Ganesha Chaturthi festival.

In the introductory section, I have referred to an example given by Flueckiger of a Ganesha that was made of clay and got immersed during the festival time. Traditionally, the Ganeshas employed during Ganesha Chaturthi were made of clay and the use of non-biodegradable materials is only of recent time. The use of Plaster of Paris started approximately 15 or 20 years ago when the size of public Ganeshas increased and alternatives to clay were introduced to reduce the weight (interview Aarthi, 2 September 2022, Chennai; informal conversation volunteer hay & clay Ganesha, 31 August 2022, Triplicane). Clay also has a deeper connection with the origin or birth-story of Ganesha. In the *Shivapurana* (belonging to the corpus of Mahapuranas, ca 750–1350 CE) it is explained how the goddess Parvati fashions from the dirt (*mala*) of her body a male person when she takes a bath. This male person possesses all the virtuous qualities. She blesses him as being her son (Bailey 2020; Vanita and Roy 2000, pp. 81–84). Instead of the reference to *mala* or impurity, a temple secretary of the Hindu Munnani of central Chennai explained that traditionally *kaliman* (clay) was used to create festival Ganeshas. Ganesha himself was also made from organic matter he explained. Parvati used turmeric to make a tiny idol and before taking a bath she breathed life into to turmeric ball. That is how Ganesha came to life (informal conversation temple secretary Hindu Munnani, 31 August 2022, Triplicane). Some other people also made reference to the birth-story of Ganesha and related it to the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi and the use of clay to create Ganeshas (informal conversation friend of Shakti Amma, 27 August 2022, Vellore). However, as I explained earlier, Ganesha Chaturthi is not a festival to celebrate the birthday of Ganesha. Another story from the *Puranas* makes more sense to illustrate the origin of the festival. This is the story of Ganesha and Chandra (the moon).

Rachel Dwyer, who provides a concise and coherent introduction to Ganesha, mentions that three stories about Ganesha from the *Puranas* are very popular in films and have affected contemporary representations of Ganesha in general. In addition to Ganesha's birth-story (including the replacement of his head) and the competition with his brother, the story of Ganesha's relationship with Chandra stands out. According to Dwyer's analyses, this story functions as the central narrative of (the origin of) Ganesha Chaturthi (Dwyer 2015, p. 264). The story goes that Ganesha had overeaten himself and drives back home at night on his rat. A snake scares his rat and Ganesha falls down. His stomach bursts and he spills the sweets. The moon (Chandra) laughs at him and Ganesha curses the moon so that it becomes dark. The other deities beg Ganesha to restore Chandra. The curse could not be undone but from that time onwards the moon waxes and wanes every month. This

all allegedly happened on the fourth (*chaturthi*) of the light half of the Bhadrapada month, which is the day that the Ganesha festival starts (Dwyer 2015, p. 267). Despite the popularity of this story that I encountered in many (children's) books and popular articles on the internet, it was not commonly referred to as an important reason to celebrate Ganesha Chaturthi or to promote Green Ganesha. For the latter, the outstanding iconographic feature of the elephant head was also of no relevance. What was referred to most often, was that Ganesha is an 'easy god'. For the playful, wonderous and organic character of Ganesha, I first refer here to a famous miraculous event in India's recent history: The Ganesha milk miracle of 1995.

On 21 September 1995 Ganesha *murtis* from all over the world allegedly agreed to drink the milk offered to them on a spoon. Normally during Hindu rituals of devotion, food is placed before the *murti* and believed to be consumed in a non-physical manner by the deity. Through that act, the food is transformed into sanctified *prasad* that is distributed for the devotees' consumption (Wood 2008, pp. 338, 344). Isolated incidents of deities who actually consume offerings are not unusual in India (Vidal 1998, p. 152). But on 21 September 1995 these miracles happened with Ganesha and several deities associated with him in temples and family shrines, both in India and throughout the world. One of the peculiarities of the miracle was that it led to replicability of the miracle (Vidal 1998, pp. 150–51, 163). Denis Vidal mentions that it is no coincidence that the miracle took place only a fortnight before the *ekamata yatra*, a procession throughout the country organized by the political party the BJP with the assistance of the VHP and RSS. Also, it was exactly 100 years ago that Tilak started to employ Ganesha as the symbol for demonstrations of militant political Hinduism (Vidal 1998, p. 155, see on Tilak Section 2).

Another example of the miraculous character of Ganesha is his cinematic portrayal as a typical child-god in children's movies (Dwyer 2015). *Bal Ganesh* (2007, followed by Bal Ganesh 2, 3, and 4) and *My Friend Ganesh* (2009, followed by My Friend Ganesh 2, 3, 4 and 5) became very popular. *Bal Ganesh* are animated movies that feature Ganesha's childhood. In *My Friend Ganesh* Ganesha becomes the illusionary friend of an eight-year old boy who suffers from loneliness due to his parents busy lives. The movie features several Ganesha rituals. One of them is Ganesha Chaturthi, including the great procession and immersion of Ganeshas into the waters (which for instance marks the moment that Ganesha leaves the boy). In these children's movies Ganesha is portrayed as someone you can 'employ' to overcome present-day obstacles. In general, Ganesha is known as the remover of obstacles (*vighnaharta*) and in that capacity he is addressed prior to every ritual.

Ganesha is considered an organic god who is 'transforming over space and time, geography and history' (Pattanaik 2012, author's note). When I asked about the popularity of Ganesha in general and the use of clay in particular, people most often mentioned that Ganesha is an easy god. A teacher explained, that the reverence to other deities is much more complicated. For other gods you should utter mantras, take time and give money. Ganesha on the contrary brings instant completion without much effort (informal conversation Sri Devi, 27 August 2022, Vellore). Another informant mentioned that it is only with Ganesha that you can use any material you want, to make an idol. It is not even necessary to add a face. You can make Ganesha from cow dung (interview Mr. Elango, 31 August 2022, Kolathur). In addition to his simple form, Ganesha is also not picky about locality: Ganeshas can be placed everywhere and the locality of Ganesha under a tree was several times brought forward.

In Chennai and Mumbai I noticed Ganeshas under trees but also frequently in shops. As the remover of obstacles, Ganesha is believed to pave the path towards (business) success and he can be found on the counters of many different types of shops (see Figure 3). Together with his fat-belied iconography, Ganesha seems a symbol of consumerism—of which the story of Ganesha and Chandra provides evidence as well.

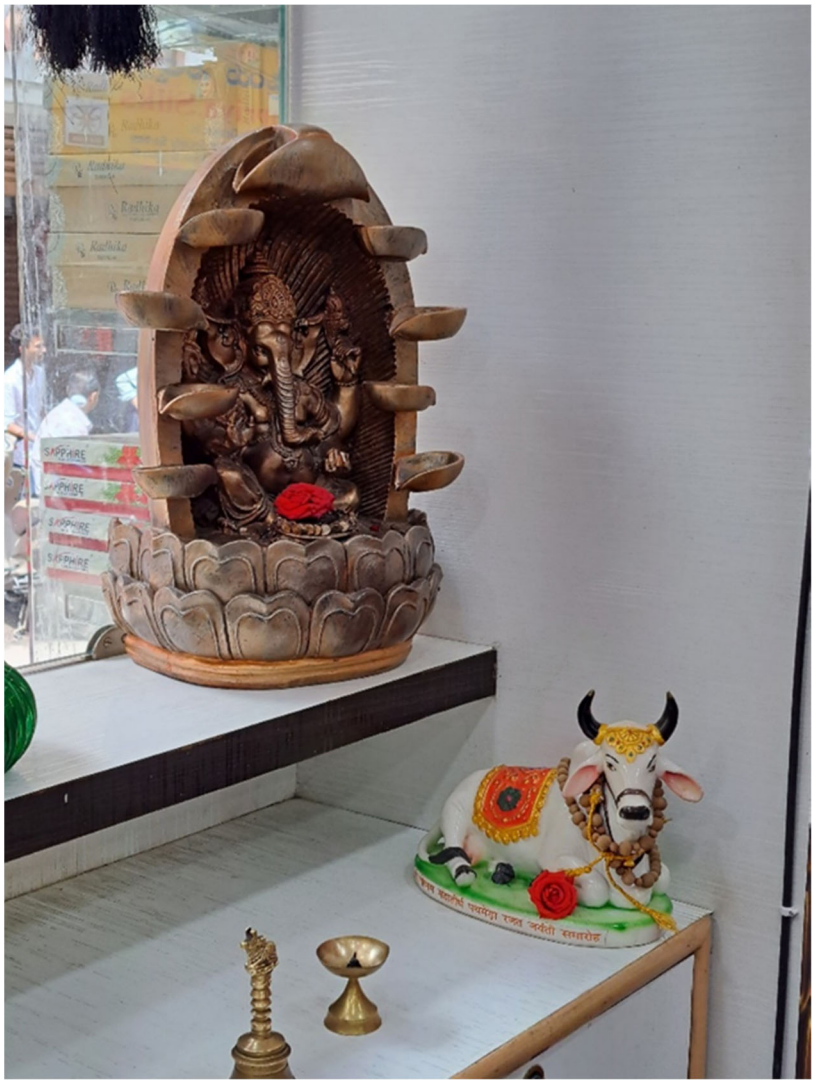

Figure 3. Ganesha on the counter of a wholesale shop in Bangalore. Picture taken by author, 23 August 2022, Bangalore.

The examples of how Ganesha is featured and employed as a political icon, performer of miracles, and symbol of consumerism/growth indicate that Ganesha is an organic deity who is easily adapted to diverse social (political) phenomena. Ganesha has become a pan-Indian deity revered to by Hindus from diverse sects, brahmins and non-brahmins, in the North and South of India and in diaspora (Fuller 2004, pp. 265–66; Dwyer 2015, pp. 263, 264). Combined with his birth-story in which organic matter is used by Parvati and the tradition of making Ganesha of organic matter by Hindus themselves, Ganesha's adaptability provides multiple opportunities to turn him into a Green deity. I discuss and analyze the recent invention of Green Ganesha in the following sections and reflect on the relevance of Hindu traditions and stories for Green Ganesha in more detail in Section 6.

4. The Materialising of Public Ecofriendly Ganeshas during Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai

In this section I discuss what kinds of ecofriendly Ganeshas were used during the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai in 2022 and which dynamics of a (contemporary) Green Hindu identity are disclosed in the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. I focus here on the large public Ganeshas. The ecofriendly Ganeshas used in domestic rituals are discussed in Section 5. The main criteria for inclusion of the ecofriendly Ganeshas to

be discussed here, is that people themselves referred to the Ganeshas as ecofriendly or sustainable. In this section I also critically reflect on their notion of 'sustainability'.

In 2022 the ten-day festival of Ganesha Chaturthi started on 31 August. Large Ganeshas were installed at multiple streetcorners in the cities some days prior to the start of the festival. I noticed in Chennai that these were frequently installed next to or in the close proximity of a Hindu temple. Some of these Ganeshas were constructed over a longer time period at the site itself (I discuss examples of the special ones below) but in Chennai most of the Plaster of Paris Ganeshas were sponsored by the Tamil regionalist right wing nationalist organization the Hindu Munnani. These Plaster of Paris Ganeshas were mass-produced in the northern neighborhoods of Chennai: Kodungaiyur/Vyasarpadi (informal group conversation, 31 August 2022, CIT Nagar). I was told that the Hindu Munnani donated in 2022 15,000 Ganeshas throughout Tamil Nadu (informal conversation CIT Nagar, 30 August 2022). The donation of the Ganeshas by this right wing Tamil Nadu nationalist organization, is obviously visible in the public sphere because they also hung their party flags around the temples and donated flags to people who joined the procession (see Figure 4).

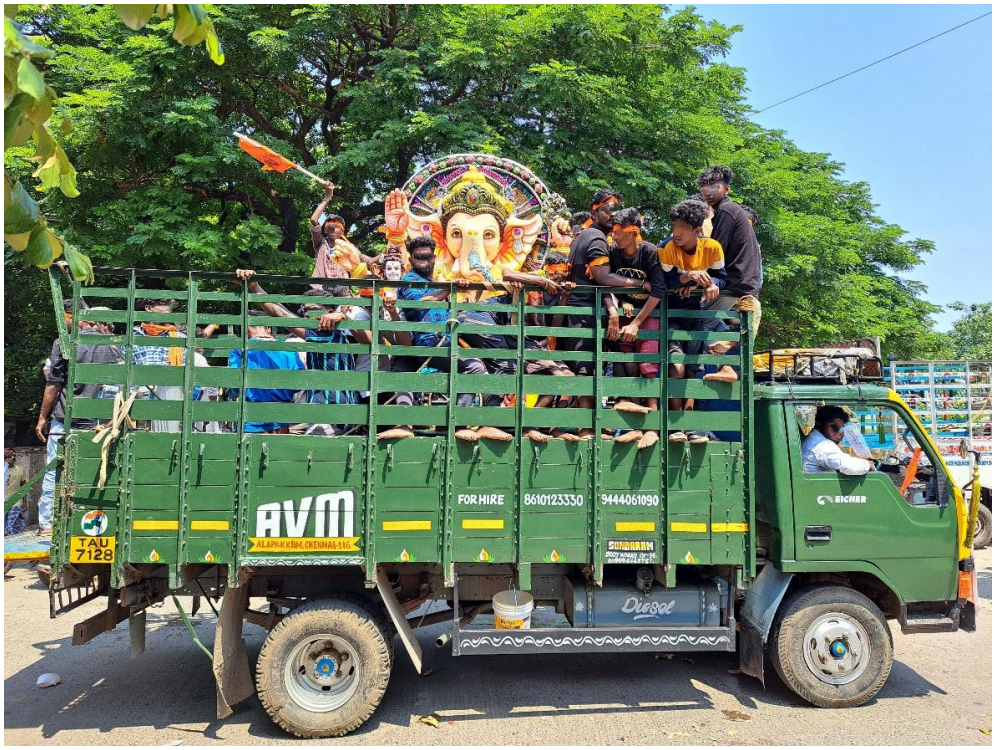

Figure 4. Young men with a Hindu Munnani flag and a Plaster of Paris Ganesha on a cargo truck at Valluvar Kottam on the day of *visarjan* (immersion) of Ganesha in Chennai. Picture taken by author, 4 September 2022, Chennai.

In Chennai, the festival ended on 4 September with the *visarjan* (immersion). It was planned on this day because a Sunday was convenient. Three sites in the city were marked by the city police as places where collective *visarjan* of the large Ganeshas was allowed to take place (interview Mr. Elango, 31 August 2022, Kolathur). One of them was Pattinapakkam beach where approximately 1500 Ganeshas were immersed on Sunday afternoon and evening (informal conversation police officer, 4 September 2022, Pattinapakkam beach; see Figure 1). The 'procession' with the Ganeshas that would become immersed at Pattinapakkam beach started collectively at a monumental site: Valluvar Kottam (devoted to the poet Valluvar). From all sides colorful cargo trucks loaded with a Plaster of Paris Ganesha of between 1.5 and 2.5 m in height, and several sponsors/supporters, assembled at this traffic hub (see Figure 4). Around 2.00 p.m. the procession started: There was no walking involved over the 6 km to Pattinapakkam beach: all trucks drove with high speed

to the sea shore. There, a rail with a trolley was installed to transport the Ganeshas over the beach. Also, a crane was used to lift the Ganeshas into the sea. Most of the Ganeshas were made of Plaster of Paris. The trucks also contained smaller clay Ganeshas that were used in domestic rituals. These Ganeshas were placed at the beachside or thrown into the sea (observation, 4 September 2022 Valluvar Kottam; observation, 4 September 2022, Pattinapakkam beach).

In Mumbai the festival took the entire ten days. Several large Ganeshas in Mumbai were sponsored by local communities, organizations and (political) parties. Like in Chennai, political parties seized the opportunity to present themselves: they made donations to the Ganeshas and erected billboards of their sponsorship. One important player in Mumbai, was the *Shiv Sena*: a Maharathi regionalist right wing nationalist Hindu party. Throughout Mumbai artificial ponds were constructed for immersion and several other places were marked by the police for immersion (informal conversation informant Cha Peshwa Pandal, 9 September 2022, Mumbai). Juhu beach was one of these places. In contrast to Chennai where people gathered at the beach side, in Mumbai the police blocked all the entrances to the beach on the day of *visarjan* (9 September). This caused lots of agitation in the afternoon: families came from far to immerse their Ganeshas and they had to hand them over to volunteers who immersed the statues in the sea. Only one or two (male) family members were allowed to join. The statues given to the volunteers were made of clay but decorated with artificial colors and jewelry/clothes. People brought them on wooden planks and after the immersion the volunteers returned some of the clay/mud of the Ganesha on the plank to the families. A lady of approximately 40 years old explained that they take it home and keep it until the next year (observation/participation, 9 September 2022, Juhu Beach).[3] In the evening, it was time for the large Ganeshas to get immersed. Several of them came on trucks but local communities also walked with hand carts to Juhu beach (and other immersion spots in the city). I joined with a group of people who drummed and danced over a distance of 1.5 km (but it took 2.5 h to reach the spot). They had a large Plaster of Paris idol placed on a cart. When we came close to the beach, several young men cut the line to join for the *visarjan*, but the number of participants allowed to join the *visarjan* at the beach side was limited (participation in visarjan rituals of local community, 9 September 2022, Juhu).

Despite the initiatives to banish the use of Plaster of Paris Ganeshas, the vast majority of large Ganeshas that got immersed in Chennai and Mumbai were still made of Plaster of Paris. Throughout India, the rules of the ban of Plaster of Paris were relaxed because of the impact that COVID had on the festival in the previous years (informal conversation volunteer Girgaon cha Maharaja, 9 September 2022, Girgaon). Despite this relaxation, several people seized the opportunity of the festival to create so-called ecofriendly Ganeshas, a tendency started prior to COVID and reinforced by governmental legislations. I first introduce here two categories of alternative large Ganeshas that were marked as ecofriendly and point out some dynamics of a (contemporary) Green Hindu identity that I found materialized in those large ecofriendly Ganeshas.

The first category of large ecofriendly Ganeshas are Ganeshas that are not meant to be immersed at all. They are not made of (or only partly made of) biodegradable materials but covered with utensils. I have not found these type of ecofriendly large Ganeshas in Mumbai but there were some very outstanding ones in Chennai. One was made of metal pots with coconuts, one of *vels* (the divine weapons of Murugan), one of pencils and one of fruits (I have not seen the last one, it was deconstructed very fast most probably because of the ripening process). I discuss the metal-pots-coconuts and pencils Ganeshas here in more detail to point out some aspects of a Green Hindu identity.

The first ecofriendly Ganesha that I visited in Chennai, was a large Ganesha covered with two (*kalasha*) products that Hindus use in the *puja:* a metal pot with a coconut on top (see Figure 5). The Ganesha was placed in a temporary *pandal* at a T-junction (Lakshmi Amman Koil Street and Perambur Red Hills Street) in Kolathur (north Chennai) and the location of this Ganesha caused congestion: people stopped with their bikes to take pictures

and media reporters came to cover this Ganesha in their media items. For this Ganesha 3600 coconuts and metal pots were used. It took 25 days to make the Ganesha and an average of ten people worked during that period day and night to construct it. Next to the Ganesha was a temporary counter with local representatives of the Hindu Munnani who sold tickets to people for 300 rupees to collect a metal pot with the coconut on the day of *visarjan* (4 September 2022). Some of the metal pots with the coconuts were also donated and they referred to it as a 'gift'. Across the street there were some massive banners with photographs of local representatives of the Hindu Munnani and the pictures of the ecofriendly Ganeshas that were constructed at Kolathur in the previous five years (except for 2020 and 2021): their first ecofriendly Ganesha (in 2017) was a Ganesha of sugarcanes (observation, 31 August 2022, Koluthur; observation, 2 September 2022 Koluthur, informal conversation representative Hindu Munnani, 2 September 2022, Kolathur).

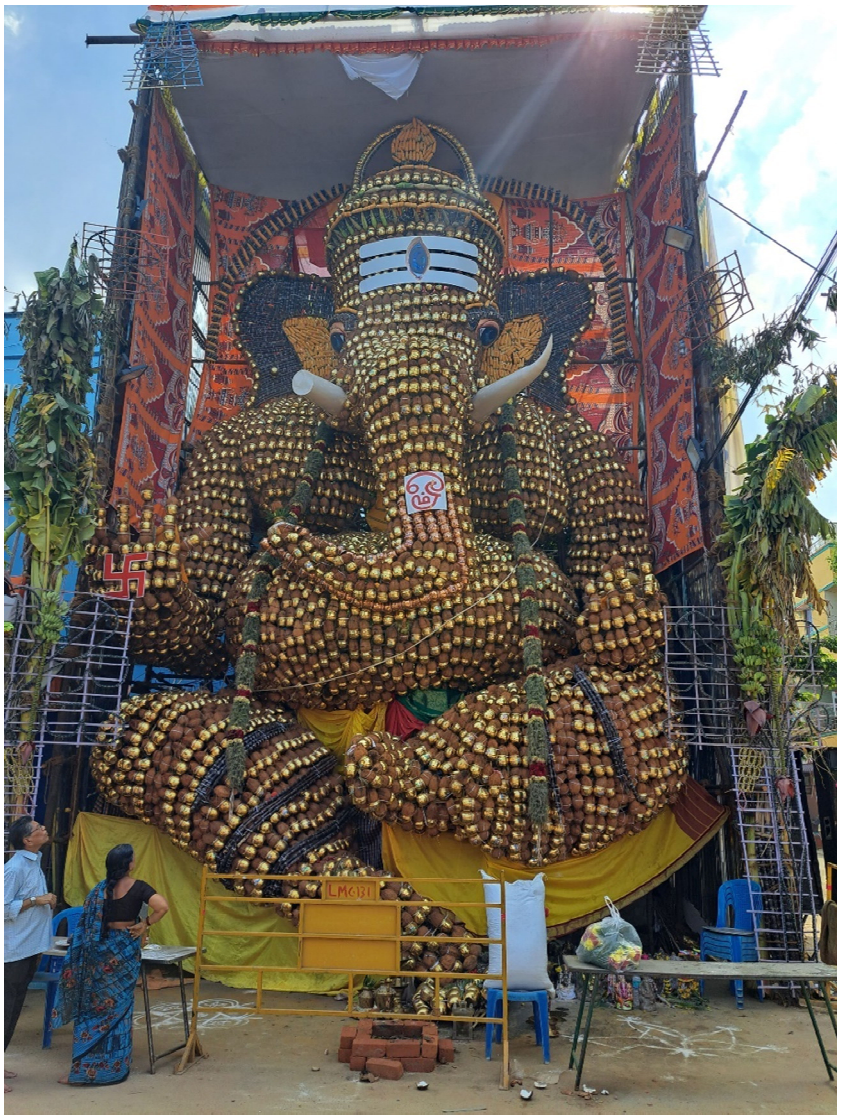

Figure 5. Ecofriendly metal pots and coconuts Ganesha in Kolathur sponsored by the Hindu Munnani. Picture taken by author, 3 September 2022, Chennai.

The second large ecofriendly Ganesha made of utensils that I introduce here, was located in Manali. Manali is an industrial and residential area in the northern part of Chennai. This Ganesha was covered with (sets) of markers and pencils (see Figure 6). In addition to a Ganesha, there was his *vahana* (vehicle) rat or mouse made of pencils and

pencil sharpeners, a small Ganesha made with vegetables, and a shiva *lingam/yoni* made of an oblong watermelon placed within a pumpkin. The Ganesha was constructed over a period of one month by local volunteers in a temporary *pandal* next to the Sarva Manala Vinayagar Allayan *mandir* (which was only a small shrine). Mr. Nagaraja and his friends told me that they constructed Ganeshas for 12 years now and that they have made special Ganeshas for 5 years. In the previous years they made Ganeshas of for example sugar canes, pineapples, and steel glasses and I even was gifted steel glasses of the Ganesha of one of the previous years from them. One of the initiators explained that they come up with a new and fancy Ganesha every year to enhance the sense of pride of the local community. In this working class industrial neighborhood in the outskirts of Chennai, they take pride in making a collective effort to create outstanding Ganeshas that make the news. The pencils and markers of this year's Ganesha were donated to the government school on the day of *visarjan* (informal conversation Mr. Nagaraja, 1 September 2022, Manali; observation, 1 September 2022, Manali).[4]

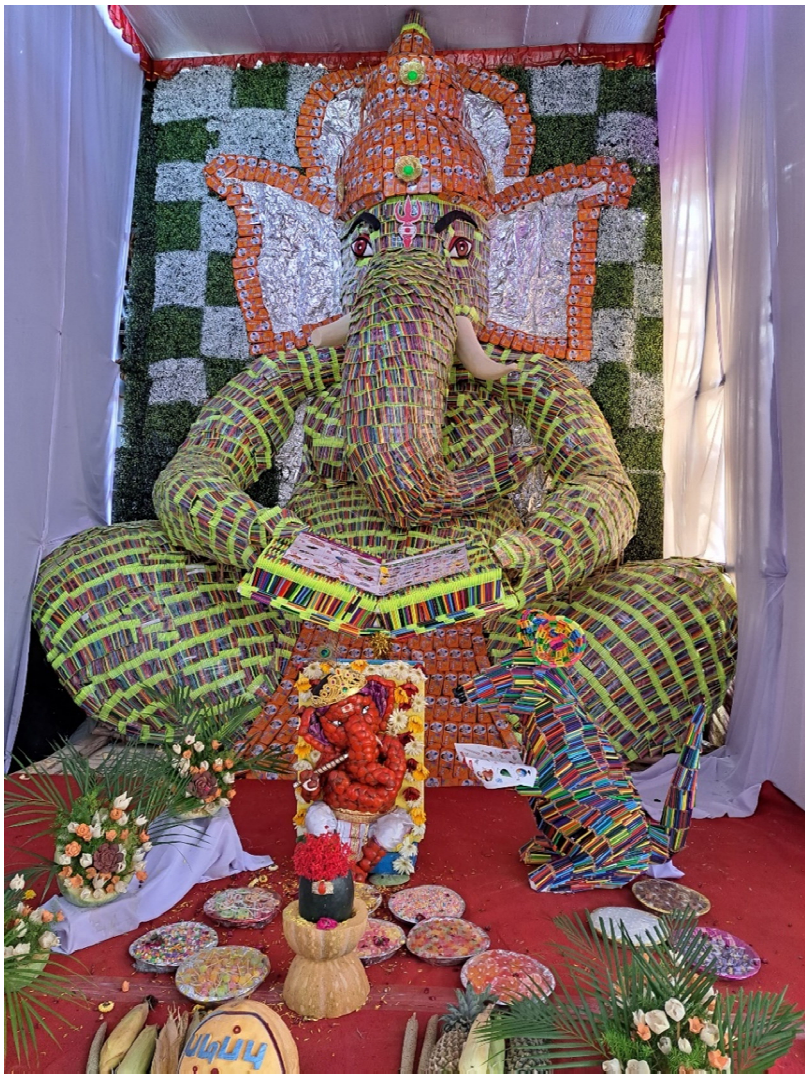

Figure 6. Ecofriendly pencil Ganesha and his *vimana* (vehicle) in Manali. Picture taken by author, 1 September 2022, Chennai.

The second category of large ecofriendly Ganeshas are large Ganeshas that are made of biodegradable materials and meant to be immersed. I visited several of these types of ecofriendly Ganeshas in Mumbai and discuss two different types of them here.

The first Ganesha to be mentioned here is placed in the so-called Mumbai Cha Peshwa Pandal located at Vile Parle in Mumbai. This Ganesha was made of tissues that were wet an pressed together. They molded the tissues and used banana stems for the structure. After drying they painted the tissues with water based colors. This famous tissue Ganesha was placed in a *pandal* and other fancy elements were added: Ganesha 'drives' a mythical eagle which is pulled by mechanical tigers (see Figure 7). Also, a movie was displayed. The movie took 8 min and explained how a family member gets COVID and how the other family members hope that he will overcome it with the help of Ganesha (observation Cha Peshwa Pandal, 8 September 2022, Vile Parle). This movie was shown 130 times a day during the entire festival time of Ganesha Chaturthi. It is since 2008 that the Vile Parle community makes their Ganesha with tissues. In the past, they used clay and mud and the Ganeshas were small in size. When the statues became larger, Plaster of Paris became used. Now it is ecofriendly since 14 years. In 2008 one of the members of the organizing committee came up with the idea to use tissues. This person died soon after the meeting. The tissue Ganesha is a tribute to him. The tissue Ganesha has now become an icon of local pride. This special Ganesha attracts lots of people and is funded by local sponsors (informal conversation volunteer 1 Cha Peshwa Pandal, 8 September 2022, Vile Parle; informal conversation volunteer 2 Cha Peshwa Pandal, 9 September 2022, Vile Parle).

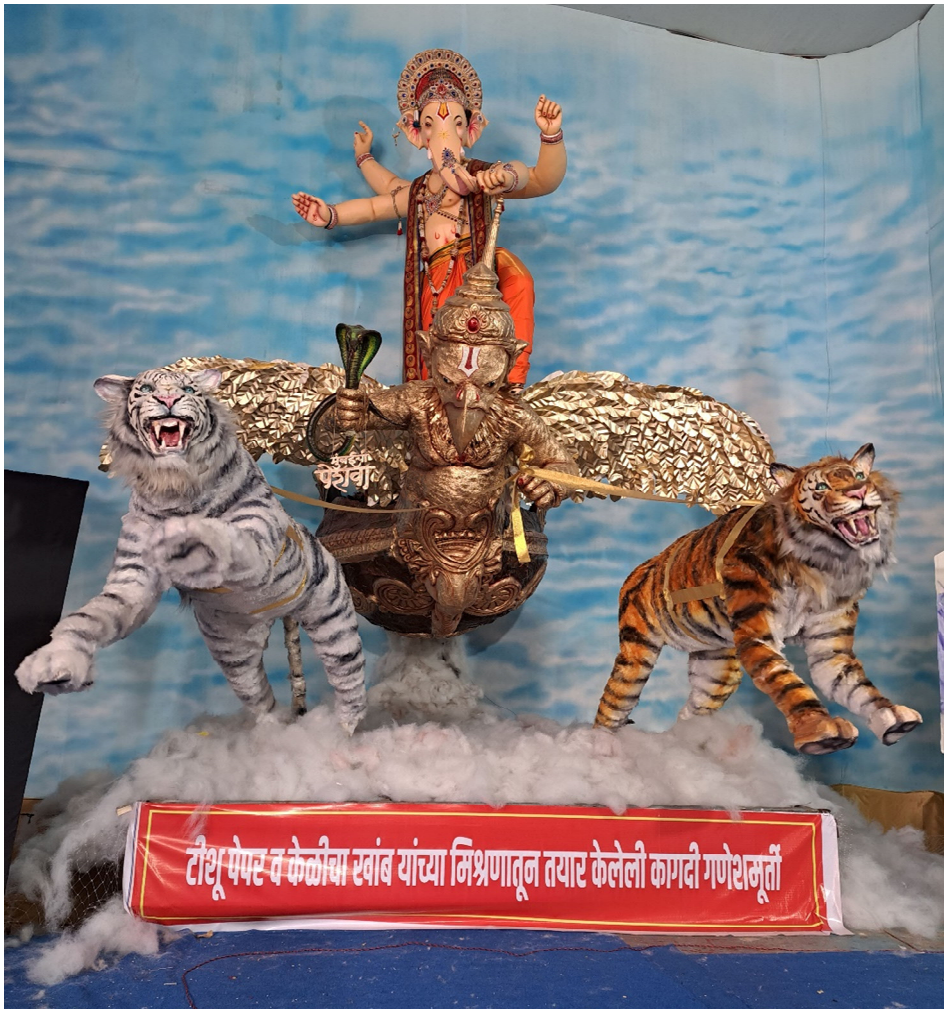

Figure 7. Tissue Ganesha in Vile Parle. Picture taken by author, 9 September 2022, Mumbai.

The second Ganesha to be discussed here is referred to as Girgaon cha Maharaja and located in Girgaon (South Mumbai, there are two more of these type of Ganeshas in the area). It is made of *shadu chi mati*, a type of pottery clay (see Figure 8). On the

day of *visarjan* this Ganesha of 6000 kilos was taken in procession on a trolley (on which it has been constructed) to an artificial pond. They construct Ganeshas at Girgaon for 91 years and over the years the size increased. The construction of the Ganesha in 2022 was done by a group of five people over 15 or 20 days. It was modelled after a Ganesha from Indonesia. At Girgaon, they make every year a Ganesha that is modelled after a famous international Ganesha. One volunteer explained that they started to make ecofriendly Ganeshas because of the governmental regulations and using clay is part of the Hindu culture (*sanskritiya*). Also, they continue to make these type of Ganeshas to attract people (informal conversation volunteer Girgaon cha Maharaja, 9 September 2022, Girgaon). That both the types of ecofriendly Ganeshas in Mumbai have a strong aesthetical component becomes clear when we look at the rituals performed in these *pandals* during the festival time. At both places a smaller Ganesha was placed on the left corner of the stage. It is to these Ganeshas that people conducted their rituals. The large Ganeshas are not used in the *puja:* they have—except for the procession and the *visarjan*—lost their ritual functions and are to a large extent turned into eye-catchers (observation, 9 September 2022, Girgaon; observation, 8 September 2022, Vile Parle).

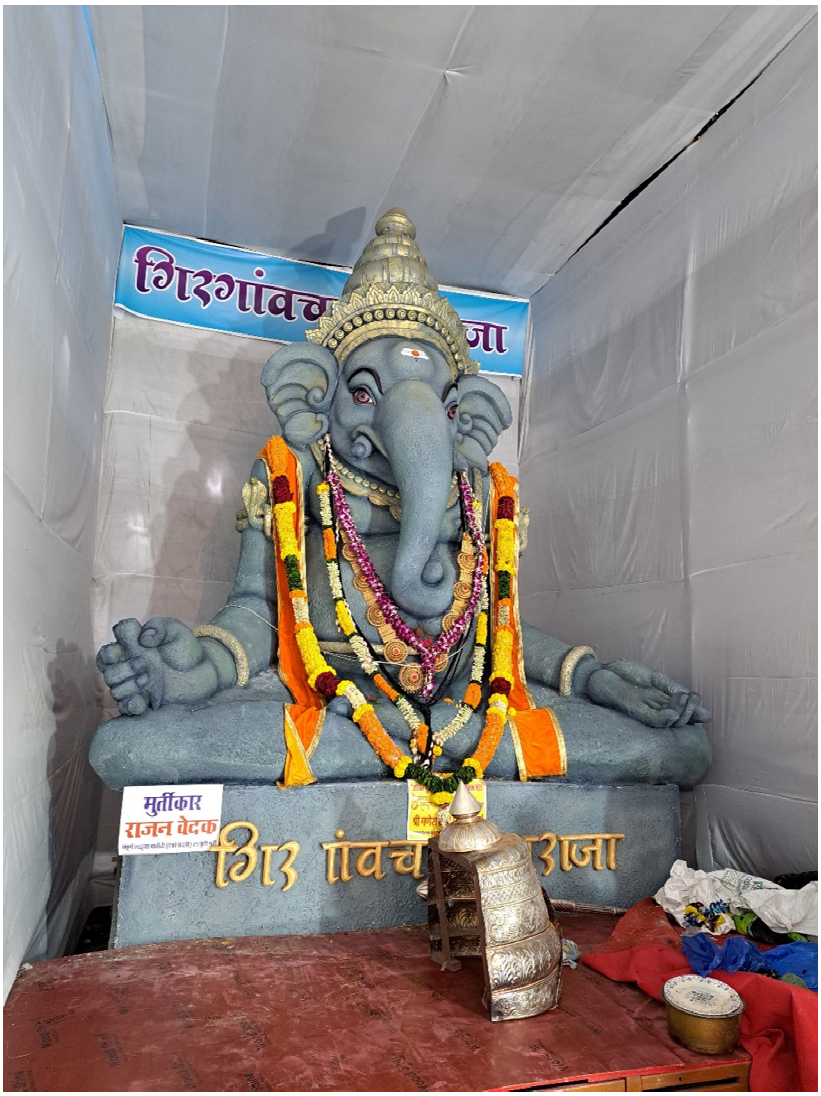

Figure 8. Girgaon cha maharaja Ganesha made of *shadu chi mati* (type of clay). Picture taken by author, 9 September 2022, Mumbai.

Both types of large ecofriendly Ganeshas that I have discussed were—amongst other reasons—consciously constructed to set examples of what ecofriendly Ganeshas can look like. The Hindu Munnani in Chennai donated in 2022 thousands of Plaster of Paris Ganeshas, but it was the ecofriendly ones that were extensively covered in the newspapers as their outstanding ecofriendly or 'Green' Ganeshas. Which dynamics of contemporary Green Hinduism become disclosed in the materialising of the large ecofriendly Ganeshas?

Before I turn to the first dynamic of environmental sustainability that I noticed, I do underscore here the fact that the Ganeshas that I have discussed, were referred to by people themselves as ecofriendly. I am well aware that the use of Styrofoam to stick the utensils on, or the collection of clay from the rivers causes harm to the environment. Despite this, the ecofriendly Ganeshas disclose some interesting dynamics that relate to environmental sustainability.

The first dynamic is the local manufacturing (by hand). The on-site construction of the ecofriendly Ganeshas is of course necessary because of the weight and fragility of these Ganeshas.[5] The local hand-manufacturing counterbalances the mass-production of the Plaster of Paris Ganeshas. The large utensil Ganeshas and the large biodegradable Ganeshas are all constructed by local people at the centers of their sub areas. Hand-manufacturing of the Ganeshas is in line with a principle that penetrates into the discourse of environmental sustainability: eco-localism. Eco-localism is the creation of local, self-reliant, community economies (Curtis 2003, p. 83). Looking at inspirational sources within Hinduism itself, this feature of the ecofriendly Ganeshas relates to Mahathma Gandhi's call for self-sustainability during the colonial period. He employed self-sustainability to encourage pride of the local community (against British industrialization). A side effect of eco-localism is the creativity that is brought about by the hand-manufacturing and this is in line with the suggestion made in Kaur's article on Ganesha Chaturthi (see Section 2).

A second dynamic of these large ecofriendly Ganeshas relates to the intersection of environmental sustainability and social justice. This relates to Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics that considers social justice as key to successful changes in global sustainability goals. Martin Haigh mentions about sustainability initiatives in India that religion is an emergent factor in this. In his analysis of several Indian NGO's, he noticed the intersection of self-sustainability, a low ecological footprint, social justice, and the development of spiritual rather than economic capital (Haigh 2018, p. 73). Although the dynamic of 'social justice in the ritual of Green Ganesha is still in its infancy, the donating aspect crystalized out in the utensil Ganeshas adds an extra dimension to it: instead of immersion biodegradable or non-biodegradable Ganeshas into water bodies, Ganesha Chaturthi is used to contribute to social development of the local community. The pencil Ganesha is an excellent example of this: in this working class neighborhood the children in the governmental school benefit from this Ganesha because the pencils are donated to them.

5. Ganeshas in Domestic Rituals and Green Hinduism

Because the small-size Ganeshas are easier to produce, there are even more possibilities and efforts to create an awareness of environmental sustainability. This section discusses some examples and takes the element of tradition or *sanskritiya* (culture) and its relevance for contemporary Green Hindu identities into deeper consideration.

Several days prior to Ganesha Chaturthi, small size clay Ganeshas could be bought from street vendors, in shops, and also ordered online (observation 25 August 2022, Bangalore; observation 30 August 2022, Chennai; See Figure 9). The statues that were sold to conduct domestic Ganesha Chaturthi rituals with, were between 20 and 35 cm in height. These statues were made of clay and some of them were painted (with artificial paint). One street vendor in Chennai laid his broken clay Ganesha in a washing-up bowl to proof that his Ganeshas were biodegradable (observation 30 August 2022, Chennai). I noticed that the Ganeshas of the street vendors were uniform in design. One of the street vendors explained that they add a substance that they use for bricks to the clay, they mix it together and then use a mold. A Ganesha of between 20 and 25 cm that is produced in this way, costs

around 100 rupees (a bit more than 1 euro; informal conversation street vendor, 31 August 2022, Chennai). The production costs of these mass-produced clay Ganeshas are very low. For most of the street vendors there were no underlying motives of environmental sustainability behind their businesses. I now discuss several alternatives of small Ganeshas that are explicitly marked as ecofriendly, or sustainable to answer the question of what kinds of ecofriendly Ganeshas are used during the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi and how the festival is employed to create an awareness of environmental sustainability.

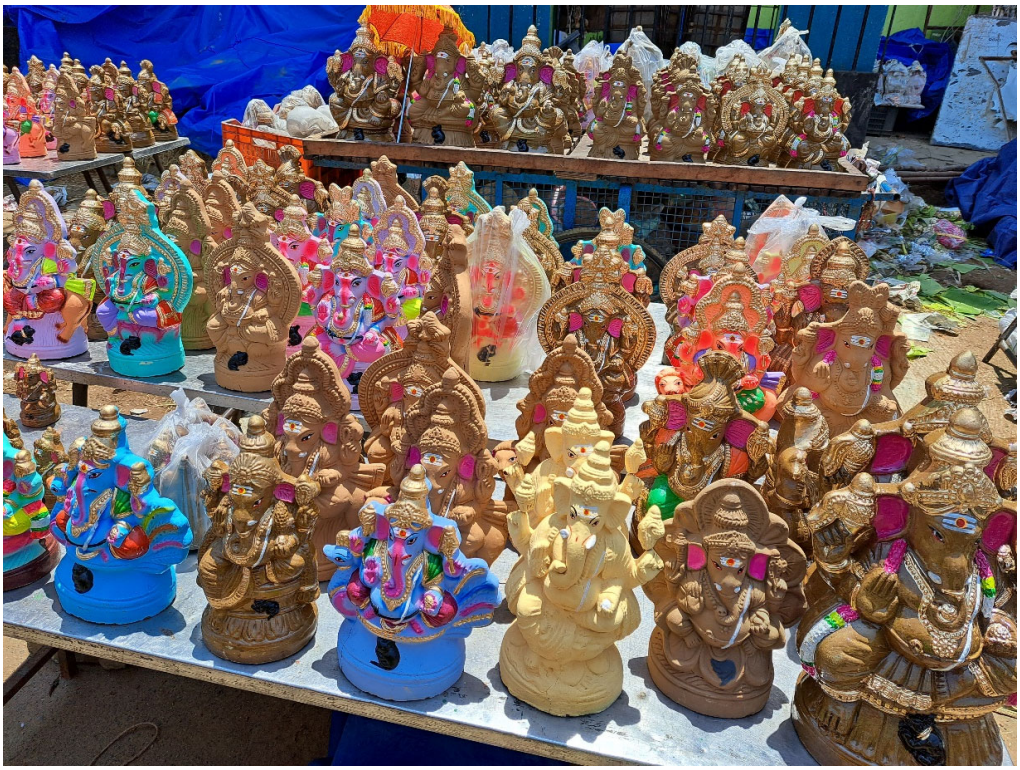

Figure 9. Street vendors sell mass-produced clay (mixed) Ganeshas. Picture taken by author, 30 August 2022, Chennai.

The first category of ecofriendly Ganeshas to be used in domestic rituals at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi are the hand-made Ganeshas of clay. I went to a pottery 'factory' in Vellore on one of the days prior to the start of the festival and the family was extremely busy at that time with the hand-manufacturing of Ganeshas (see Figure 10). I was told that the members of the family belong to an indigenous traditional Tamil caste of people who have the patent on pottery production. Terracotta was very common in the past but the Indian pot culture almost got lost. In the months prior to Ganesha Chaturthi this family mainly molds Ganeshas and they produced in 2022 around hundreds of them. The entire process of the production of these Ganeshas takes three to four months. They contrasted their craft—for which they used the concept *agama* or tradition—to the mass-produced clay Ganeshas. They also added a religious component to their traditional way of crafting and molding Ganeshas: they put their body, mind, and soul to the work and during the process of manufacturing, they utter mantras (interview Mr. A. Dinakaran, 28 August 2022, Vellore).

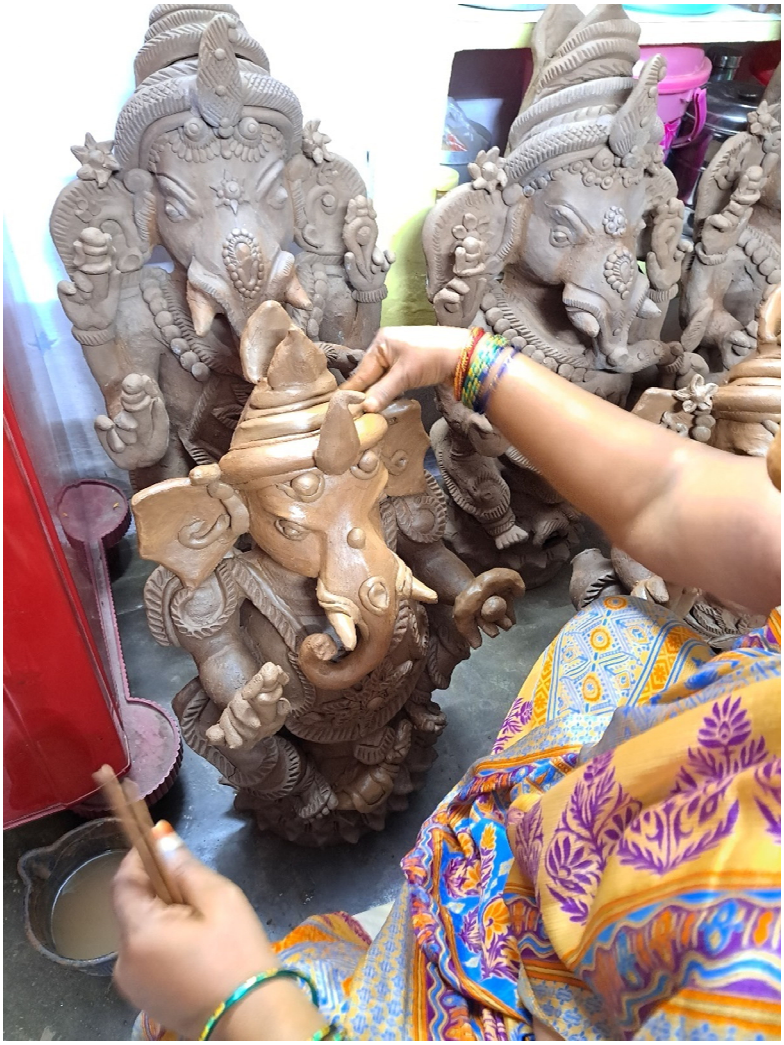

Figure 10. Hand manufacturing of clay Ganesha by pottery family in Vellore. Picture taken by author, 28 August 2022, Vellore.

On the evening prior to the first day of Ganesha Chaturthi, I had the opportunity to create my own Ganesha of clay at the 'Green Ganesha: An eco friendly clay Ganesha making event'. This event was organised by and for students of the Indian Institute of Technology Madras. It was the first time that they organised this event and there was hardly enough clay to provide all approximately 60 students with the opportunity to mold their own Ganesha. For most students it was the first time to make their own Ganesha and they told me that—with some exceptions—they never made a Ganesha at home. Again, I was told that this is the traditional way of making Ganeshas for the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. The Ganeshas that we produced during the eco friendly clay Ganesha making event were kept overnight and immersed the day after. I also was told to place a seed in my Ganesha. This brings me to the second category of Ganeshas: the seed-inside clay Ganeshas.

The second category of ecofriendly Ganeshas are also made of clay but have something additional that is—to my knowledge—not something that was done in the past: the seed-inside clay Ganeshas. These Ganeshas are hand-made or produced with a mold and contain seeds inside. One of the places where they sold these seed-inside clay Ganeshas in Chennai was Harith Tharang, a plant nursery in T Nagar (see Figure 11). At this plant nursery they have sold ecofriendly Ganeshas around the time of Ganesha Chaturthi for 7 years. They use pottery clay for it and it takes three days to make a Ganesha. Inside the clay Ganesha

different types of seeds are conserved: coriander, lady finger, spinach, lemon grass and chilly. The buyers of a seed-inside clay Ganesha receive proper instructions of how to grow a plant out of Ganesha: at Harith Tharang they sell it together with potting soil and flowerpots. Customers are told how to water it. Asking about their motivations to sell these seed-inside Ganeshas, the assistant manager explained that they mainly make these Ganeshas to create an awareness of greenery (interview with assistant manager Harith Tharang, 2 September 2022, Chennai).

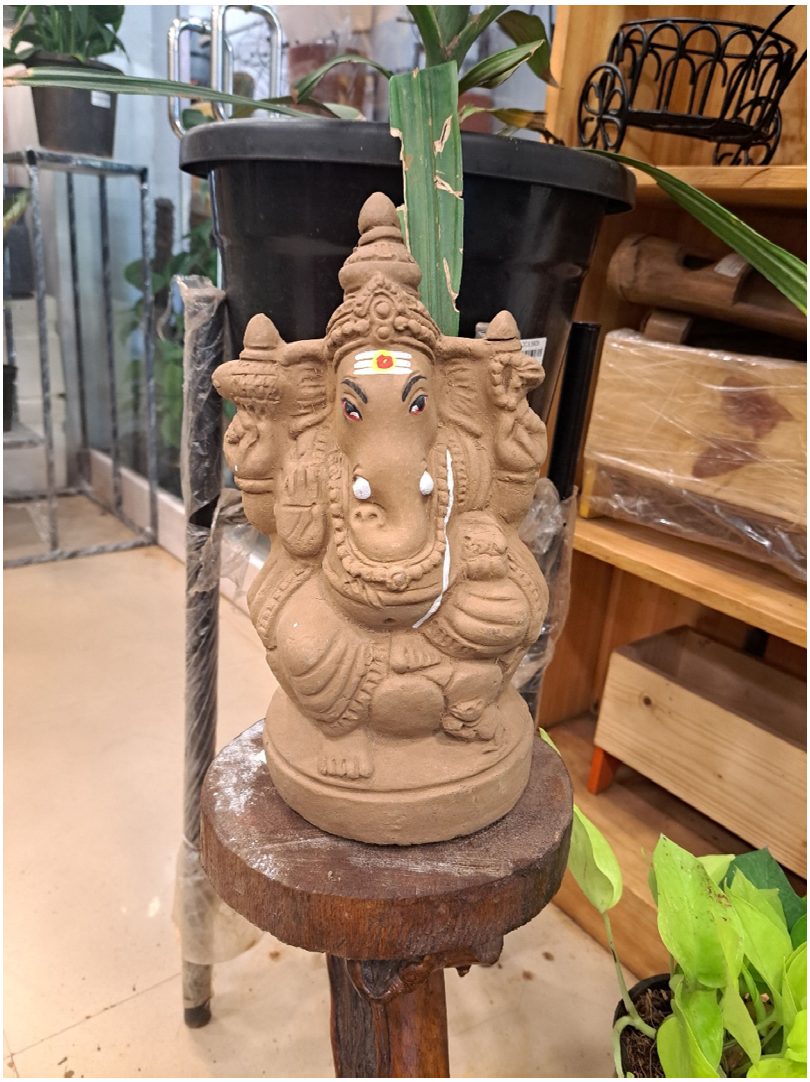

Figure 11. Seed-inside clay Ganesha sold at Harith Tharang, a plant nursery in T Nagar. Picture taken by author, 2 September 2022, Chennai.

Other organizations or shops sell these seed-inside Ganeshas as well. Prasanth, the PR-manager of 'my Eco Ganesh' in Maharashtra runs together with his family a business of ecofriendly Ganeshas. They make their living of producing and selling ecofriendly Ganeshas throughout the year and sell for instance clay-Ganeshas, paper Ganeshas and 'tree' (or seed-inside) Ganeshas. Prior to the ecofriendly Ganesha business, his family was also engaged in green initiatives: they grew for instance chemical free organic mangos (interview with Prasanth, 8 September 2022, Mumbai).[6]

The festival of Ganesha Chaturthi is now actively employed by environmentalists, and people working in ecofriendly businesses to counterbalance the pollution by providing alternative Ganeshas that have the reverse effect. An excellent example are the seed-inside Ganeshas that are sold with instructions of how to grow a plant/herb from the

Ganesha. Although there are some other festivals in India for which *murtis* get immersed (for instance Durga *visarjan*), it is the very popular festival of Ganesha Chaturthi—still causing severe pollution to the waterbodies every year—that now becomes increasingly relevant to make a change and to set an example of what Green Hinduism should look like. It is specifically *because of* the polluting effects of the Plaster of Paris Ganeshas and the awareness recently created throughout social media that the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi is an excellent opportunity to create an awareness of environmental sustainability (interview with Prasanth, 8 September 2022, Mumbai).

Another dynamic of contemporary Green Hinduism that becomes crystalized at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi is the idea that traditional Hinduism is ecofriendly. People who were actively involved in promoting ecofriendly Ganeshas or offering workshops to create your own ecofriendly Ganesha explained that traditionally, the Ganeshas made to celebrate Ganesha Chaturthi at home were made of clay. It was only when the popularity of Ganesha Chaturthi increased and people started to install large Ganeshas at public sites (approximately 20 years ago, this differs from place to place) that non-biodegradable materials became popular. Plaster of Paris Ganeshas are light enough to carry to the immersion spots. This tendency to create an awareness of the tradition/*agama* and indigenous hand-craft practices of clay Ganeshas, should according to Emma Mawdsley be placed in the broader discourse of what is referred to as neo-traditionalist Hindu environmentalism. In this discourse the dominant idea is that there were indigenous self-contained environmentally balanced communities in India in the past. This discourse contrasts the 'East' and 'West' and presents an authentic, traditional, indigenous, ecologically sensitive India against the colonial, and modern post-colonial Indian state (Mawdsley 2006, p. 383). Mawdsley makes clear that there are striking parallels between neo-traditionalist narratives of (science and) the environment and Hindu nationalist arguments, especially when we look at the way the 'past' is eulogized. What we see in the development of Green Ganesha, however, is that the effort to root the contemporary Green Hindu identity in the traditional Hindu culture (*agama*, *sanskritiya*), emerges across the entire spectrum: (political) right wing Hindu nationalists, temple representatives, business men, environmentalists, and people involved in NGOs. Also, these identities frequently intermingle.

Ganesha Chaturthi and the recent 're-invention' of clay Ganeshas disclose a dynamic of modern Green Hinduism in which there is an interest and effort to (re-)invent traditional Hinduism and indigenous local practices which are considered inherently green. There is a focus on (alleged) ancient (indigenous) practices and the re-invention of these practices combined with a pride of the nature-friendly essence of Hinduism. The focus on the hand-manufacturing of small clay Ganeshas to be used in domestic rituals at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi, puts this dynamics of a Green Hindu identity and its interaction with national pride into light and materialises it in the context of contemporary Hindu rituals.

6. Discussion

In this final section I reflect in more detail on five topics that were touched upon in my analyses: (1) the centrality of (alleged) traditional practices over stories in the emergence of Green Ganesha, (2) NGOs and beach cleaning (3) the function of public rituals to display multiple (emerging) identities, (4) the relevance of Ganesha's organic identity for the emerging of an alternative Green Ganesha, and (5) the emergence of a contemporary Green Hindu identity across the entire (political) spectrum.

1. At the very start of my research I assumed that either Ganesha's birth story or his elephant-head, would play a role in the contemporary representation of Ganesha as a Green deity during the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. It turned out that this was not the case. For Green Ganesha, Hindus mainly referred to Hindu practices, how their (great) grandparents moulded clay and mud in the shape of an elephant-headed figure and that they used these Ganeshas in rituals. The story of Ganesha's birth from organic matter was sporadically mentioned but barely as an inspirational source to create Green Ganeshas in the present. Also, the elephant-head was of no relevance at all. In general, stories were less important

than (alleged) traditional practices. This tendency corresponds with the assumption that practices are of greater relevance to Hindus than doctrine. Although history has shown us that there is plenty of counterevidence against this assumption, Ganesha is turned into a Green deity with reference to practices over stories—even when stories about Ganesha and organic matter are there. Hitherto, the greening of Ganesha remains limited to the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi although I learned about some exceptions from an artist who makes Ganeshas of bamboo leaves as wedding decorations (interview Aarthi, 2 September 2022, Chennai). Time will tell if the greening of Ganesha during Ganesha Chaturthi results in new stories about Ganesha as a green deity. Following from my research on Green Ganesha, I recommend researchers on contemporary Green Hinduism to look at Hindu practices in past and present to gain a deeper understanding about contemporary Green Hinduism.

2. The second topic is the relevance of NGOs and (other) environmentalist groups in India that seize the opportunity to organize activities during and after the festival. Prior to Ganesha Chaturthi several NGOs offered the opportunity to create clay Ganeshas. NGOs are of special relevance to create environmental awareness at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi because of the beach cleaning activities. In Chennai and Mumbai, the large public Ganeshas that were immersed, were still made of Plaster of Paris. The day after the immersion, volunteers from multiple organizations cleaned the beaches in both metropoles. The relevance of NGOs is not visible when we only look at the festival, but these groups are very important in the aftermath of the festival. It is due to the massive pollution that is caused by the immersion, that Ganesha Chaturthi has become a very suitable festival to put the environmental consequences of pollution into light.

3. Most of the academic articles in the fields of humanities and social sciences about Ganesha Chaturthi can be placed in the broader discourse of Hindu rituals and Hindu nationalism. The key publications that I found so far about Ganesha Chaturthi focus on the politicization of the festival, the public articulation of a Hindu identity versus Muslims, and the role of right wing Hindu nationalist parties. This also holds for the analyses of Ganesha's milk miracle: this is primarily framed as a political event. I have pointed out that the Hindu Munnani is very dominant in Tamil Nadu when it comes to the organization of Ganesha Chaturthi. On the day of *visarjan* several lectures and speeches by politicians were delivered at the Pattinapakkam beach side while the Ganeshas were immersed into the sea. Also, in Mumbai the Maharathi regionalist party the *Shiv Sena* employs the festival to promote itself.[7] Billboards that show the heads of politicians are abundant at the time of Ganesha Chaturthi. At first sight, the festival still seems to be dominated by a multiplicity of Hindu nationalist voices. With this article I have shown that the public ritual of Ganesha Chaturthi provides opportunities to display multiple (intersecting) identities. Some people explicitly expose a right wing Hindu nationalist identity, others seize the opportunity to create environmental awareness at the festival time and actively promote Green Hinduism (and these identities occasionally intersect). The inclusion of environmental awareness in the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi is rather recent. In a recent article on the (ritual of) Ganga *aarti*, Tamara Luthy highlights the power of religious rituals, guru's, and institutions to change public opinions about environmentalism in India (Luthy 2019, pp. 230, 238). She points out that Hindu religious symbolism is reworked when public performative rituals are employed to spread environmental awareness. The initiatives to create eco-friendly Ganeshas during Ganesha Chaturthi are mostly once-a-year initiatives of private or single companies and organisations and have so far not led to a 'new' narrative of Green Ganesha. For now it shows, however, that public rituals provide unique opportunities to highlight emerging phenomena. One other relevant angle to look at the festival that was suggested by Kaur, are aesthetical expressions and the role of artists. My research has confirmed the relevance of this perspective: at some places people construct a spectacular 'new' Ganesha each year and there seems to be an (implicit) competition. Moreover, especially at places with outstanding large public Ganeshas, the rituals were performed to a small Ganesha that was placed in the front. This indicates that several of these large Ganeshas have lost some of their rituals functions and are mainly turned into eye-catchers. This aspect of the

aesthetics of Ganesha during Ganesha Chaturthi needs more research. Another element of the festival that we should pay attention to, is the emotional dimension. Ganesha's milk miracle makes us aware of the relevance of experiencing Ganesha's involvement in people's lives in the present. During Ganesha Chaturthi, devotees are touched when they bade Ganesha a final farewell at the moment of immersion—which is also featured in *My Friend Ganesha*. These elements of the festival altogether disclose that Ganesha is an organic deity who appeals to multiple dimensions of people's lives.

4. In this article I have defined the organic nature of Ganesha as (1) Ganesha's origin from organic matter and (2) his quality to develop and easily adapt over time. Ganesha's origin from organic matter was of almost no relevance for Green Ganesha during the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. The organic nature of Ganesha in the sense that he easily adapts was, however, frequently brought forward. Ganesha has the quality to easily adapt to diverse social (political) phenomena and because he is not limited to a particular sect, he enjoys—compared to other deities—more freedom to transform. As the remover of obstacles, I have seen him in multiple forms during the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai in 2022. In the *pandal* of the tissue Ganesha in Vile Parle he was framed as helper in times of the COVID pandemic and in Chennai, one of the Plaster of Paris Ganeshas held a COVID vaccine. How and what obstacles should be overcome with Ganesha, differs from time to time. Green Ganesha is a present-day response to the global ecological crisis that we face in the twenty-first century. Green Ganesha stands in sharp contrast to the fat-bellied provider of material blessings and the overeating Ganesha who spills his sweets. This contrast was, however, not explicated in my fieldwork. What became very clear during Ganesha Chaturthi, is that Ganesha is a deity whose appearances reflect a specific Zeitgeist. Due to the stricter legislations on the use of Plaster of Paris during Ganesha Chaturthi and the great urgence of the global ecological crisis I expect that Green Ganesha will gain a permanent place next to the 'consumerism' Ganesha.

5. The final topic deals with the intersection of multiple identities (mainly the right wing political and the Green Hindu identity) that I have discussed in Section 5. Mawdsley suggests that there are striking parallels between neo-traditionalist narratives of (science and) the environment and Hindu nationalist arguments. I have explored how both environmentalists and right wing Hindu nationalists deal with the 'past' in the construction of a Green Ganesha and noticed that (alleged) traditional practices are of great relevance when it comes to Green Ganesha, more than stories and myths. In general, the preoccupation of right wing Hindu nationalists with an alleged preservation of the national heritage includes a spatial (environmental) dimension and Tamara Luthy refers to the special place of sacred geographies in the context of Hindu ecological nationalism (Luthy 2019, p. 238; Macklin 2022, pp. 980–81).[8] An example of this are the projects of reforestation of (alleged) indigenous forests and sacred groves (Kent 2013, pp. 2–6). The projects of nature conservation of Hindutva organizations on the one hand and the appropriation of Hindutva's cultural politics by environmental movements as mentioned by Mukul Sharma, needs more attention in research about the connection of Hinduism and ecology (Sharma 2012). What is clear from my research (and also research from others scholars) is that environmentalism in India is not so much a leftish activity, but closely intertwines on several levels with right wing Hindu nationalism.

I have pointed out that the effort to root the contemporary Green Hindu identity in the traditional Hindu culture (*agama*, *sanskritiya*), emerges across the entire spectrum: (political) right wing Hindu nationalists, temple representatives, business men, environmentalists, and people involved in NGOs. Again, I would like to stress here that multiple identities intersect in the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi. Based on my research, I suggest that research on contemporary Green movements (not limited to Green Hinduism and India) should take into account the relevance of (religious) traditions as motivational sources. This is a dynamic that I am going to investigate in more detail in my up-coming research projects.

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Notes

1 Fieldwork for this article has been conducted in 2022 during the festival period of Ganesha Chaturthi in Chennai and Mumbai. Tamil Nadu, with Chennai as its capital city, was the first state to ban Plaster of Paris idols in 2004 (Malusare 2014). Although I noticed that the rules were not followed at all, and Plaster of Paris is still commonly used, there are several ecofriendly Ganeshas in Chennai that might set further examples for other cities and states. Mumbai is the other city where I conducted fieldwork. My intention to include Mumbai was that it is considered the city where the (public celebration) of Ganesha Chaturthi historically started (see Section 3). The celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi was indeed more extensive than in Chennai but despite this, there was compared to Chennai less variety in large ecofriendly Ganeshas.

2 One author who mentions the ecofriendly Ganeshas is Flueckiger (Flueckiger 2015, p. 137).

3 This preservation of the mud till next year is different from the donation of mud from the famous Khairatabad Ganesha (see introduction): there it was explicitly mentioned that people should use it for gardening purposes.

4 I suppose that the fruits of the public fruit Ganeshas are also donated (and not sold) but I am not sure about this because there was no opportunity for me to visit a fruit Ganesha. An example of the social component of eco-friendly Ganeshas are the Ganeshas made by Rintu Rathod. In 2021 she made a chocolate Ganpati, kheer Ganpati, and Haldi milk Ganpati. She explicitly mentions that she gives the *prasaad* to underprivileged kids (Team VOI 2021).

5 I am not sure if the tissue Ganesha was also onsite constructed.

6 An alternative of seed-inside Ganeshas that are not meant to enhance greenery but are meant to be immersed, are the *navadhanya* (nine grains) Ganeshas produced for instance by Kovai Kulangal Padhukappu at Coimbatore. The grains that are added to the clay turn into feed for fish when the Ganeshas are immersed into waterbodies. They also sell seed-inside Ganeshas with corn and wheat for greenery. Those ones come with the instruction to dissolve the Ganesha in a bucket and pour it out in the garden to let the seeds grow (Devanathan 2022).

7 Mukul Sharma mentions that Bal Thackeray (the founder of the *Shiv Sena*) claimed to be an environmentalist (Sharma 2012, pp. 9–10). This is one of the examples that are mentioned by Sharma to show the intersection of environmentalism with Hindu nationalism in India.

8 The article of Macklin provides useful general insights into eco fascism. It also provides an interesting analyses of the intersection of Hinduism and Nazism in the work of The Greco-French esoteric Hitlerite Savitri Devi (1905–1982).

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